DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 245 862 RC 014 809

AUTHOR	Roop, Peter
TITLE	Sik-ki-mi. Indian Culture Series: Stories of the Blackfeet.
INSTITUTION	Montana Council for Indian Education, Billings.
REPORT NO	DE-91; ISBN-0-89992-091-8
PUB DATE	84
NOTE	27p.; For related document, see RC 014 807-809.
AVAILABLE FROM	Council for Indian Education, Box 31215, Billings, MT 59107 ($1.95 softcover; $6.45 hard cover).
PUB TYPE	Guides - Classroom Use - Materials (For Learner) (051)
EDRS PRICE	MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS	*American Indian Culture; American Indian Education; *American Indian History; American Indian Literature; American Indians; *Childrens Literature; *Culture Contact; Elementary Education; Instructional Materials; *Reading Materials; Tribes
IDENTIFIERS	*Blackfeet (Tribe)

ABSTRACT

The children's story is one of a series about the Blackfeet Tribe at the height of its power in Southern Alberta and North Central Montana. In the story, Eagle Head, a Blackfeet boy, proves his bravery as he faces the first steamboat on the Yellowstone River and recaptures his chief's favorite buffalo horse, Sik-ki-mi, in a raid on a Crow camp. His courage wins him the right to ride the horse in races against the Atsinas. The story is illustrated throughout with full-page black and white drawings. (SB)

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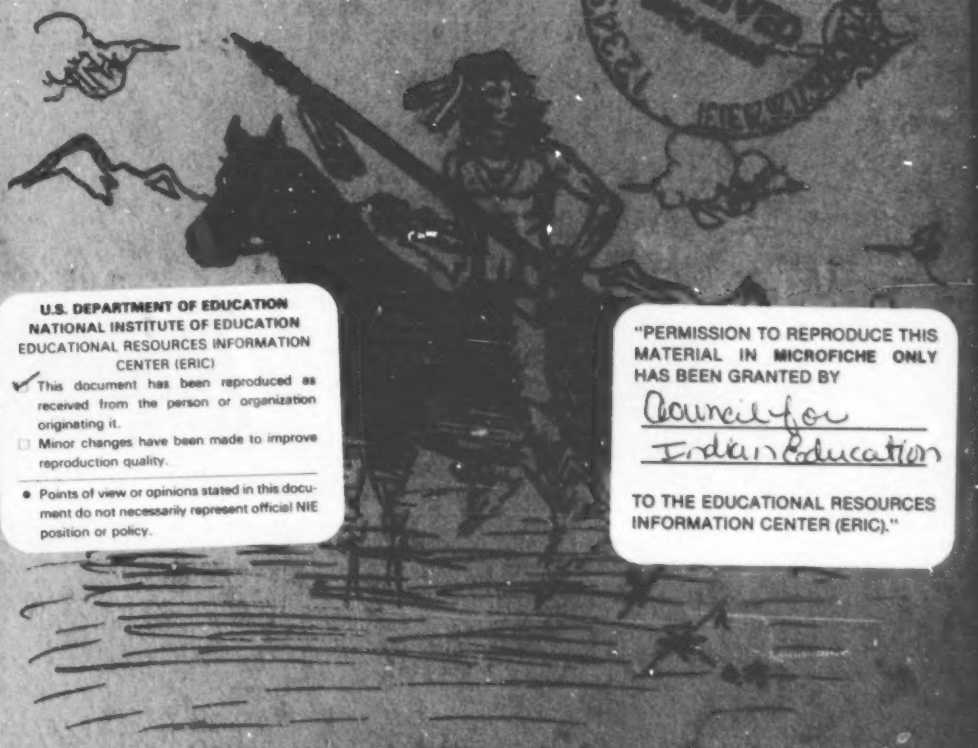
Sik-ki-mi

by
Peter Roop



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Indian Culture Series
Stories of the Blackfeet

COUNCIL FOR INDIAN EDUCATION
and
HEART BUTTE SCHOOL BILINGUAL PROGRAM
DE-91 $1.95

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Sik-ki-mi

by
Peter Roop

Illustrated by
Shawn Running Crane

Indian Culture Series
Stories of the Blackfeet

Published cooperatively by the
COUNCIL FOR INDIAN EDUCATION
517 Rimrock Road
Billings, Montana 59102

and

HEART BUTTE SCHOOL BILINGUAL PROGRAM
Heart Butte
Blackfeet Indian Reservation, Montana

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ISBN—0-89992-091-8

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SIK-KI-MI

Eagle Head watched the herd fording the river. The horses fanned out, splashing through the shallow water. Eagle Head had never before seen so many horses captured on one raid.

"Kii! We must have taken as many horses as there were lodges in that Crow camp," laughed Owl Child.

"Ah! But remember that half of the horses had been stolen from our own camp by the Crows," said Eagle Head.

Eagle Head smiled at the thought of the Blackfeet raiding party sneaking through the tall prairie grass as they crept into the Crow camp. Without a sound they had stolen their own horses and many more besides. Now they were driving the precious animals back to their camp. Eagle Head was excited about the celebration that his people would give for the returning raiders.

"The Sun certainly favored us by letting us recapture Sik-ki-mi," Eagle Head said.

"Ai-yah! It was powerful medicine," Owl Child said as he nodded his head.

Both boys watched the great black horse, Sik-ki-mi, as he led the herd across the river. Sik-ki-mi's coat was solid black, as black as the coals of a burntout fire. His strong

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muscles rippled under his smooth coat like the wind over the tall prairie grass. Sik-ki-mi was not only the most magnificant horse in the herd, he was the chief's favorite horse.

How Eagle Head ached to climb on that broad back, to kick those smooth flanks, to race the wind on those long, strong legs. As Eagle Head stared at the horse he wondered who would be chosen to ride Sik-ki-mi in the races with the Atsina during the next moon.

Eagle Head knew that he didn't stand a chance. There were too many older boys for the chief to choose. Boys who could ride powerful Sik-ki-mi to victory, bringing glory to themselves and the whole Blackfeet tribe.

"Come on, Eagle Head," Owl Child said, interrupting Eagle Head's daydream. "Let us go. We must reach camp by nightfall." Owl Child urged his pony into the cool water.

Eagle Head turned around to see that the rest of the herd was still following Sik-ki-mi. Then he nudged his pony forward.

All at once the horses stopped. A few threw their heads back and neighed. Others turned around uncertainly. Eagle Head looked upstream. All he could see was a thin column of smoke rising above the river. Whatever was making it lay hidden by a bend in the river.

Then the horses panicked. The ones nearest the shore

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reared and ran back. Some of those already in the river plunged into deeper water and began swimming away. Others galloped wildly across the shallows and up the opposite bank.

Suddenly the air was filled with a tremendous roar. It seemed that all the buffalo in the world had bellowed at one time. Eagle Head looked upstream. Coming straight at them, shooting sparks and smoke into the air, churning the water with great flashing arms, was a huge square beast.

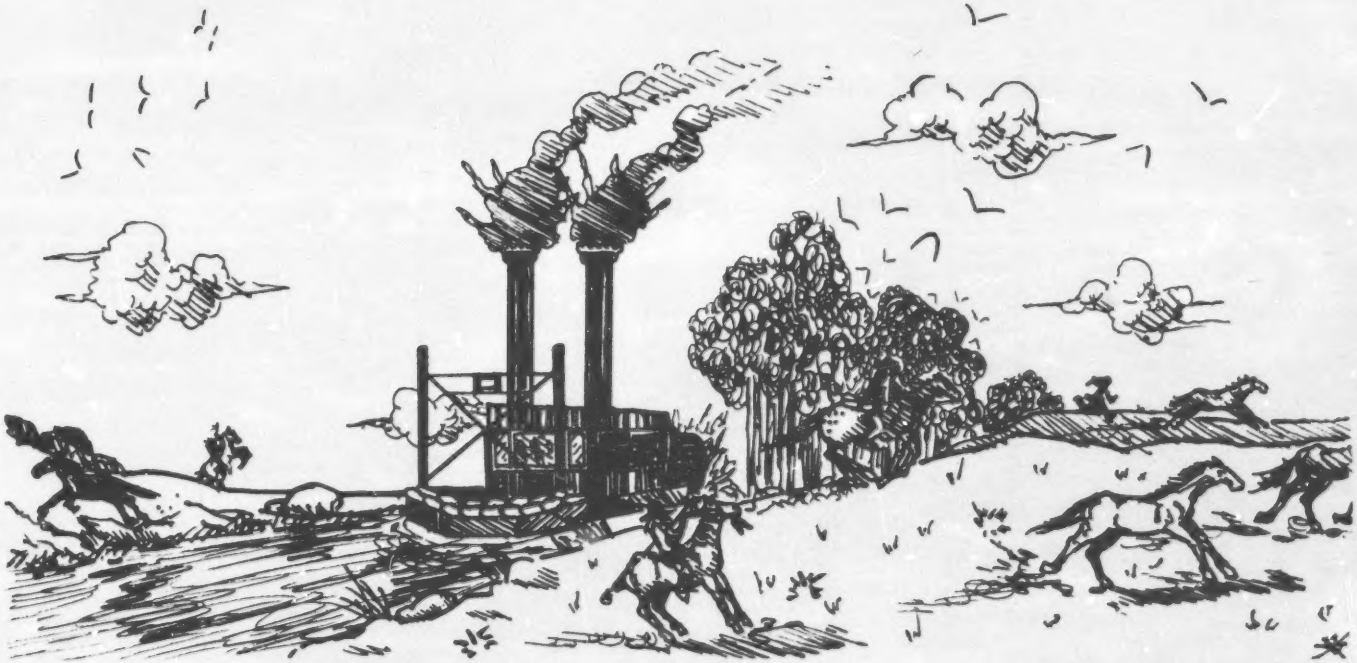
It roared at them again and thrashed through the water toward the scattering horse herd.

Eagle head kicked his pony in the ribs. The frightened animal spurted ahead.

Eagle Head clung on tightly as his pony splashed through the water and then bolted onto the land.

A few of the older braves had tried stopping the stampede. But nothing could halt the terror-stricken herd. Soon every brave was spurring his horse up the bank, heading for the safety of the main Blackfeet camp a few miles away. The horses were forgotten in the mad rush to escape the great firebreathing beast.

Eagle Head looked back over his shoulder to see the beast still smoking and charging down the river. He kicked his pony again but he didn't really need to. The pony's hooves were pounding the ground like the heavy



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beat of a war drum.

All around Eagle Head the horses were scattering. Then he remembered Sik-ki-mi. Where was Sik-ki-mi? He grasped his pony's neck tighter and began to look around for the magnificent black horse.

Eagle Head glanced back, afraid that the great smoking beast had come on land to chase them. The great beast was still in the water but Sik-ki-mi was running up the opposite bank, straight toward the Crow camp.

Without thinking Eagle Head tried to swing his pony around. But the terrified animal refused to turn. Eagle Head pulled up sharply on the animal's neck. The pony slowed enough for him to jump off. Eagle Head tumbled onto the hard ground, covering his head as the thundering hooves crashed past.

"Oh, Spirit who gives us life, protect me. Protect me from the great smoking beast," prayed Eagle Head as he lay on the ground. Soon the last of the herd had passed him.

Eagle Head dashed through the water, watching the great beast approach. It was less than two arrowshots away and coming faster. The boy smashed into a boulder under the water tumbled headfirst into the river. The beast bellowed again, sending a shower of sparks into the sky.

Eagle Head scrambled up and ran across the shallows.

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Just as he reached the bank, the great beast slowed and stopped. But Eagle Head wasn't looking. He was up and over the steep bank before he heard the white men shouting at him.

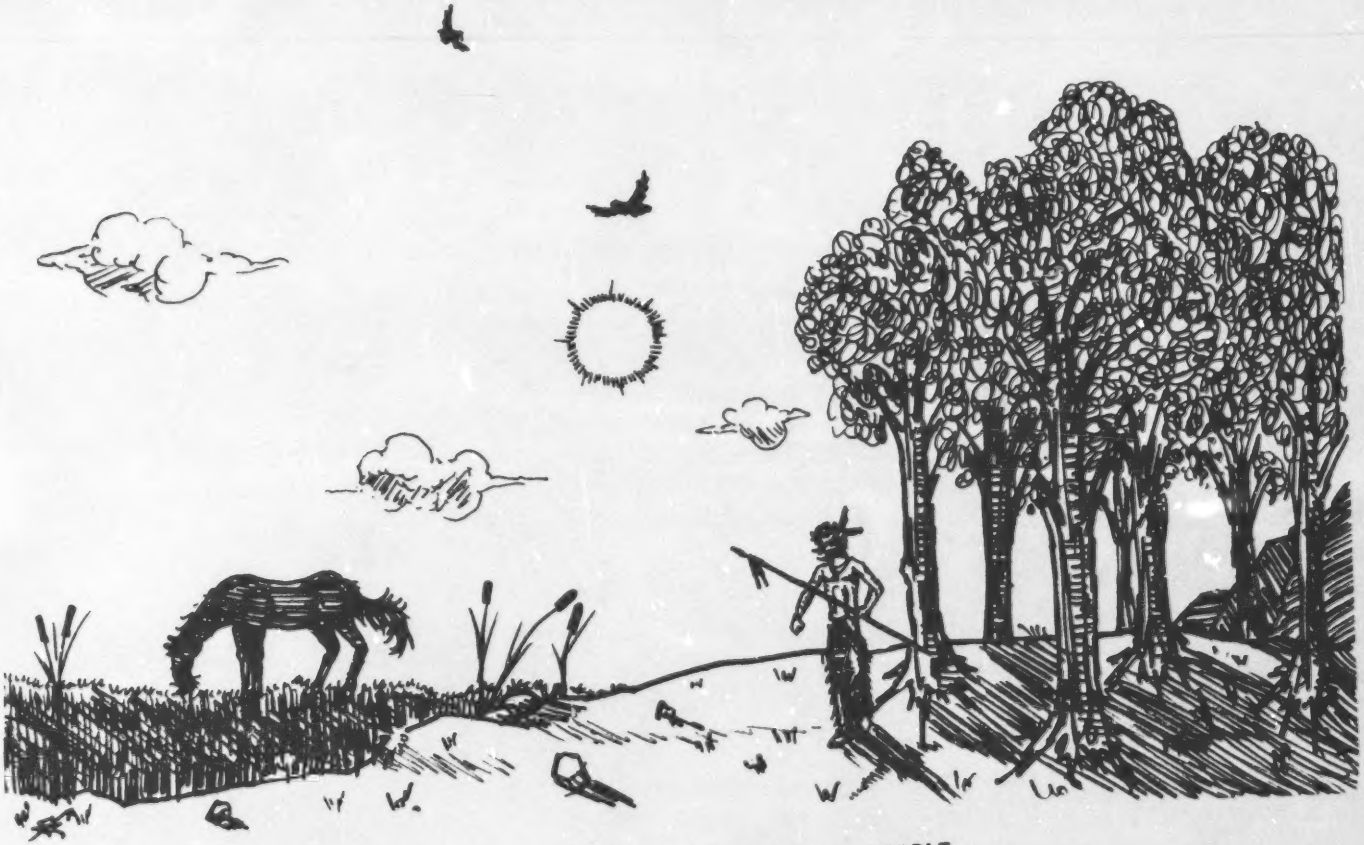
All afternoon Eagle Head ran, his eyes searching the brown horizon for Sik-ki-mi. Several times he saw coyotes slinking through the grass. Once he startled a small herd of pronghorn antelopes. But he never caught a glimpse of the black horse.

The sun was sinking behind the Backbone-of-the-World Mountains. Long shadows were creeping out onto the flat prairie.

Eagle Head didn't want to be out in the open when night came. Angry Crow warriors might be anywhere. The great beast might be prowling on land. Eagle Head decided to head for a stand of pines rising on a steep butte. From there he would be able to see all the way back to the river.

Tired, cold, and very hungry Eagle Head stopped in the woods. He forced himself to climb the tallest pine. His rapidly thumping heart almost stopped when he saw the great beast on the river, it's eyes glowing like embers in the early evening twilight.

Eagle Head made himself as comfortable as he could on the narrow branches. Then, as the white moon rolled into the sky, the exhausted boy fell asleep.



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That night the boy had many dreams. But none of them were about the great smoking beast. All night, as a gentle wind swayed his branch, Eagle Head dreamed that he was on Sik-ki-mi's broad back. He raced Sik-ki-mi against the best riders of his tribe and won. He raced Sik-ki-mi against the best Atsinas and won. He raced Sik-ki-mi against the wind and won.

Eagle Head was back on the ground as the first rays of the sun reached the green grass of the plains. He decided to search for Sik-ki-mi in the woods. If he didn't find the horse there he would return to his people's camp. There he would get another horse. Then he would search in the mountains. He would search the wide plains. He would search to the ends of the earth to find Sik-ki-mi.

The sun shone favorably on Eagle Head. Just as he was leaving the coolness of the forest he saw Sik-ki-mi, head down, filling himself with fresh grass.

"Sik-ki-mi," he called softly.

The black horse lifted its head and stared at the boy.

"Sik-ki-mi," Eagle Head called gently.

Sik-ki-mi looked away from Eagle Head towards the mountains. Then he looked back at the boy. He pawed the earth, tilted back his head, whinnied, and then galloped to Eagle Head.

The boy threw his arms around the strong neck and rubbed his face in the silky, black mane.

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"Sik-ki-mi, I thought you had gone back to our enemies the Crows. But no, not you. You are too much Blackfeet to be a traitor."

Sik-ki-mi shook his head and Eagle Head laughed.

"Ha! Sik-ki-mi. I think you almost understand me," said Eagle Head.

Sik-ki-mi held still as the boy climbed onto his back. The horse started off at a slow trot.

Riding Sik-ki-mi felt even better than Eagle Head had imagined. The powerful animal moved with an amazing gentleness. Eagle Head felt the thick muscles working easily as Sik-ki-mi trotted along. The boy couldn't help wondering what Sik-ki-mi would do if he touched his heels to those sleek flanks.

But Eagle Head knew that Sik-ki-mi wasn't interested in running. He was hungry and tired, just like himself. So the boy let the black horse graze all he wanted. Eagle Head only wished that he himself could eat grass.

As Sik-ki-mi grazed Eagle Head thought about the great square beast on the river. He had never seen or even heard of such a creature before. In his mind he saw it churning down the river, its great long arms cutting the water to shreds. He remembered the shower of sparks that shot from its head. He could still hear the mighty bellow that had echoed through the river valley.

Eagle Head shivered in the hot sun. He knew that soon

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he and Sik-ki-mi must pass by the great beast to return to his people.

When Sik-ki-mi had stopped eating, the two trotted towards the river. Eagle Head was off the horse long before they reached its banks. with Sik-ki-mi trailing behind him, Eagle Head crept to the edge of the bank.

When the boy peeked over the side he saw the great beast sitting still on the water. All around it were white men, some carrying wood into its stomach, others were cutting down trees, others were swimming in the river.

Eagle Head stared in amazement at the great beast. It was not some mysterious creature that the gods had sent to punish his people. It was one of the white man's mystifying creations. Eagle Head knew that the great beast didn't eat men and horses. It carried the strange white men and their trading goods.

Eagle Head crawled back to Sik-ki-mi and climbed on his back. He guided the horse to the edge of the bank. Then the boy gave Sik-ki-mi a sharp kick in the flanks. Sik-ki-mi leapt over the edge and galloped down to the river. The black horse splashed through the water and squirted up the opposite bank.

Eagle Head ignored the shouts of the astonished white men.

Sik-ki-mi didn't stop running until he reached the Blackfeet camp. A great cheer went up when the boy and

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horse entered the circle of lodges.

Eagle Head rode Sik-ki-mi to the chief's lodge and jumped off. The old brave stood there, his eyes brightly shining at Sik-ki-mi and Eagle Head.

"Wa! Hai!" cried the crowd, saying the words of greatest honor for Eagle Head.

Eagle Head told his tale in all of the lodges that night. He told of the horse stampede, he told of his night in the tree, he told of finding Sik-ki-mi. And he told of the great smoking beast. He told how it belonged to the white man and carried trade goods for him.

In each of the lodges his people laughed to learn that the great beast was a white man's creature and would not harm them.

When Eagle Head crawled beneath his warm buffalo robe that night, he laughed too. He laughed because the chief had chosen him to ride Sik-ki-mi against the Atsina.

TO THE READER

This is one of a series of stories of the Blackfeet Indians which take place when the Blackfeet were at the height of their power, hunting buffalo north to the North Saskatchewan River, south to the Yellowstone river, east to the Montana North Dakota border, and west to the Rocky Mountains, and raiding far beyond. The Blackfeet people still live in the heart of this territory, in Southern Alberta and North Central Montana.

Little Blaze and the Buffalo Jump is about Blackfeet life before the coming of the horse.

Natosi: Strong Medicine is a story of the capture of the first horses by the Blackfeet.

Quest for Courage is a novel of Blackfeet life in the early 1800's, when life centered around horses and buffalo, and the Blackfeet had become one of the most powerful tribes on the northern plains. Lame Bear, a boy who has been crippled by a broken leg, overcomes his handicap in the pursuit of a wild stallion which has eluded the greatest of warriors.

Sik-ki-mi is the story of a Blackfeet boy who faces the first steamboat on the Yellowstone while on a raid to bring back a buffalo horse from a Crow camp.

These stories are published cooperatively by the Council for Indian Education and the Heart Butte School Bilingual Program.

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Eagle Head, a Blackfeet boy, proves his bravery when he faces the white man's smoking monster, and brings back Sik-ki-mi, the black buffalo horse from a raid on a Crow camp.